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ABSTRACT

Although Kent State University was regarded as a symbol of radical protest after four students were killed by Ohio National Guardsmen in 1970, a survey of student opinion toward demonstrations and other kinds of free speech activity taken in 1969, shortly before the shootings, showed that the student body was in fact conservative. Other researchers observed that attitudes toward freedom of speech had grown more restrictive, suggesting that attitudes fluctuate with levels of stress in the social climate: people are less tolerant of freedoms that may endanger an already strained status quo. Based on this assumption, a study was conducted to discover if student attitudes toward freedom of speech at Kent State were more favorable in the more relaxed social climate of 1979. Two hundred thirty-two students in communication courses completed a 34-item questionnaire for measuring freedom of speech attitudes. Twenty-three of these items were taken from the 1969 survey. For 17 of those items, the 1979 sample had the more favorable attitudes toward free speech, indicating that attitudes toward freedom of speech became more tolerant from 1969 to 1979. This appears to support the speculation that attitudes toward free speech become more restrictive in a stressful social climate. (HTH)

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ATTITUDES TOWARD FREE SPEECH:

TRENDS, MEASUREMENT AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCE CONSIDERATIONS

William I. Gorden
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Shortly after student demonstrations against the U.S. incursion into Cambodia, and the dispersal by Ohio National Guardsmen of a peaceful rally protesting their presence, and the killing of four and wounding of nine students by Ohio National Guardsmen stationed at Kent State University on May 4, 1970, Kent State became a national symbol of radical protest.[1] Such a label was not justified. A large sampling of student opinion toward demonstration and other kinds of free speech activity in the fall of 1969, only a few months before the shootings, by Osborne and Gorden, provided rather a picture of a conservative student body.[2] Sizeable numbers, for example, were of the opinion that controversial speakers should be required to submit a copy of their speeches to the university administration (37%), that those who occupy buildings should be expelled (65%), and that students who participate in antigovernment demonstrations should have their government loans denied (61%). Add to these students who held conservative opinions on matters that affected student financial interest, those who were neutral in opinion and one finds only a minority who could be labeled liberal or radical.

Early in the 1970's Barbour and Goldberg suggested that attitudes toward freedom of speech have grown more restrictive.[3] A possible explanation for this tendency is when the level of stress in society is high, for a variety of political and economic reasons, people desire strong, unequivocal leadership and are less tolerant of dissidence. When the social climate is threatening, an authoritarian style of leadership may be preferred.[4] Allegiance to principles

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of free speech may be lower when people want clear direction on how to reduce perceived threat. A social climate where free speech is pervasive may itself be threatening and anxiety producing. Views which challenge the status quo, radical ideas, venting frustrations, protesting injustices, etc., all have the potential for arousing anxiety in receivers. Activation theory suggests that people resist further arousal when their level of arousal is already high.[5] Thus, when the level of anxiety in society is high, there may be a resistance to further anxiety, especially the sources of it such as free speech.

This notion would explain the restrictive attitudes toward free speech observed in 1969 by Osborne and Gorden with their sample of college students. The level of stress at Kent State University, as at most U.S. colleges, was especially high. There was a good deal of civil unrest, mainly from the anti-war movement, but also from the civil rights and women's movement. In terms of activation level, the subjects in the Osborne and Gorden survey may have been reflecting a desire to reduce stress. To inhibit free expression may have been seen as a means to quiet the social climate.

The 60s and early 70s indeed were stressful to the university. The Scranton Commission said, "The crisis on American Campuses has no parallel in the history of the nation," and "Much of the nation is so polarized that on many campuses a major domestic conflict or an unpopular initiative in foreign policy could trigger violent protest, and in its wake, counter-violence and repression."[6] Turmoil, however, was not pervasive; many campuses never suffered even a tremor. But during 1968 and 1969, scarsely a week went by without major student upheaval somewhere in the United States.[7]

Business as usual became unthinkable on many campuses. Fortunately, the majority of the protest activities were embraced by many more moderate than radical students and consequently the protests were overwhelmingly peaceful, though by no means, invariably.[8]

The students at Kent State had an activist minority. Skirmishes with university authorities were frequent. In 1969, one hundred students were entrapped and arrested while protesting in the Music and Speech Building. Community and student opinion for the most part looked with great disfavor upon the demonstrators.

The 60s provided grist for the mill of the sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists. Seymour Lipset explains that in order to understand why the passive postwar generation of the fifties was replaced by one that contained an activist minority of the "enraged," one must see the cold war mentality that dampened intellectual controversy.[9] Zbigniew Brzezinski charged the student movement with being "essentially counter-revolutionary;" they were "modern Luddites opposed to technological progress" because they had "no role to play in the new technitronic society."[10] Erik Erikson explicated the discontent of youth in terms of the Oedipal drive to emasculate authority, an outgrowth of prolonged adolesence, and identity diffusion and confustion."[11] Marxists asserted that society was forcing increasing numbers of youth to go the university to acquire specialized skills which advanced industrial societies required. Thus students were exploited, alienated members of a powerless sector.[12]

The activism of one class did seem to arouse reaction from those in another strata of this society. The parents of protestors were generally liberal or even radical, and according to David Riesman, "activists were acting on behalf of parental ideals... Similarly, some children of working-class parents from labor-union rather than the 'new politics' wing of the Democratic Party turned to George Wallace as expressing their blend of populism and cultural conservatism, and hatred for the protestors who rejected the priveleges of elite education which working-class people only wished they could gain." [13]

Relative to the turmoil in 1969, the level of stress and anxiety on college campuses in 1979, ten years after the Osborne and Gorden survey, was probably low. College students in the late 1970's have been characterized as apathetic, more fun-loving, which probably indicates a relatively low level of stress.

The students of the late seventies were different from those of ten years earlier. Unlike their predecessors of the 1960's, the students of this generation have "near total consumer sovreignity." [14] The student is more the consumer than the product of the college marketplace and therefore have realized his/her power through such tangibles as grade inflation. Activism, when it rarely surfaced, was directed against apartheid in South Africa. Average scores on the college entrance tests were considerably lower. Students were "now taking their studies more seriously ... largely for vocational reasons," but Reisman asserts that "large scale surveys and more limited intensive studies indicate that attitudes have not grow more conservative." [15]

In terms of activation level and tolerance of authoritarianism, then, a speculation would be that attitudes toward free speech on the college campus were more permissive in 1979 than 1969. In light of this speculation, the first purpose of this investigation was to discover if student attitudes toward freedom of speech at Kent State University were more favorable toward First Amendment issues during periods of campus unrest in 1969 or the relatively quiet period of 1979.

A second purpose of the study was to determine whether an instrument to measure attitudes toward free speech reliably and validly could be derived from the pool of items used by Osborne and Gorden. If in fact attitudes toward free speech do fluctuate according to the social climate, it is necessary to have a reliable and valid instrument to study the trends.

Conclusions about the American public's degree of belief in freedom of

speech, and particularly of trends, are difficult to reach because few polls have addressed the issue, few have asked enough questions and almost none have monitored the public using the same questions at regular intervals. Moreover, national polls covering free speech usually have been taken during times of special threats to civil liberties, such as wartime and the McCarthy era. The total number of questions asked by all the leading pollsters (CBS News, Gallup, Harris, Minnesota Poll, National Opinion Research Center, Office of Public Opinion Research, Roper, and Survey Research Center) between 1936 and 1970 was only 44, and in any of seven time periods no more than 10. [16]

Although lack of uniformity makes conclusions difficult, some trends are evident. The maximum percentage believing in freedom of speech for extremists before 1950 was 49%, in 1950-60 was 29%, and between 1960 to 1970 was 21%. [17] Remmers and Franklyn's studies of high school youth, which in a small way tapped opinions regarding freedom of press and speech, found a similar drop in support for free speech from 1951 to 1960, especially when applied to foreigners and minorities rights with respect toward freedom of speech, press, and peaceable assembly. [18]

The few available logitudinal studies of particular populations provide valuable data to the social scientist. [19] The classic Middletown study in 1924, [20] which included a few items relevant to free speech was replicated in 1977. [21] This replication enabled the finding that some of the religious, political, and social attitudes measured of high school youth just after World War I have persisted, but unabashed patriotism moderated and support for free speech increased. In 1924, 92% answered "True" to "The United States is unquestionably the best country in the world," as compared to 1977 when 78% answered in the affirmative. In 1924, 61% answered "True" to "Every good citizen should act according to the following statement: My Country--right or wrong." In 1977

that percentage was 49%. The percent answering "True" to the item "A citizen of the United States should be allowed to say anything he pleases, even to advocate violent revolution, if he does no violent act himself" rose from 20% in 1924 to 47% in 1977. This longest of longitudinal studies does not provide enough data to draw many conclusions, but it is the kind of study necessary if trends are to be studied and activism theory is to be tested. To date, longitudinal studies of civil liberties using a sufficient body of items are almost non-existent.

A third purpose of the study was to determine whether characteristics of the individual can explain individual differences in attitudes towards free speech. In other words, the assumption was that even if the amount of stress in society explains variance in free speech attitudes, additional variance should be explained by individual differences.

Attitudes toward free speech may be manifestations of more general attitudes toward communication. Hart, Carlson, and Eadie conceptualized three attitudes toward encoding messages: rhetorical sensitivity, noble self, and rhetorical reflector. [22] Characteristics of the attitude of rhetorical sensitivity are: acceptance of personal complexity, avoidance of communicative rigidity, interaction consciousness, appreciation of the communicability of ideas, and tolerance for inventional searching. [23] Hart and Burks describe the rhetorically sensitive individual as "an undulating, fluctuating entity, always unsure, continually weighing. [24]

Springing from the theoretical work of Donald Darnell and Wayne Brockriede,[25] Hart, Carlson, and Eadie position the rhetorically sensitive person between the noble self at the one extreme and rhetorical reflector at the other, as measured by a scale they titled Rhetsen. Darnell and Brockriede defined the noble selves as persons who "see any variation from their personal norms as hypocritical, as a denial of integrity, as a cardinal sin, and rhetorical reflectors as those who

have no Self to call their own. For each person and for each occasion they present a new self."[26] Our speculation was that persons who are most committed to free speech would be more likely noble selves, next most apt to be rhetorically sensitive and least likely to be rhetorical reflectors.

Our reasoning for this speculation was based upon the notion that those most committed to free speech believe in absolutes, unequivocality and authenticity. Such uncompromising values as these should be manifest in the way noble selves see their communication. In contrast those who are moderate in their attitudes regarding freedom of speech are likely to see themselves as flexible, empathic, open minded and able to influence others. In short, they see themselves as rhetorically sensitive. Those who are anti-freedom and restrictive with respect toward speech should desire orderly harmonious relationships which are typical of pure rhetorical reflectors.

We also reasoned that beliefs about free speech have political implications. Although Rhetsen essentially taps the interpersonal communicative dimension, its authors discovered that pure types RS, NS, and RR presented distinct socio-political positions.

Hart et al. emphasized that rhetorical sensitivity "may be nurtured in certain sociocultural or better, sociocommunicative environments" and Hart et al. profiles the rhetorically sensitive as more likely to be male, competitive, richer, from professional upbringing, Republican or Independant, and low in ethnic identification.[27] "The overall pattern," they explain, "seems to be that rhetorical sensitivity is a white middle-class, third-generation construct."[28]

The noble self and rhetorical reflectors, interpersonal opposites, were also found to be different demographically and politically. The noble self, was found "closely aligned to the classic liberal position" and the rhetorical reflector as "distinctively conservative." Gallup in 1969, at the peak time of protests against the Southeast Asian War found that most college demonstrators stated they

were liberal and most non-demonstrators classified themselves as conservatives. Several studies have explored the relationships of free speech attitudes to such predispositions as open-mindedness, power, hostility,[30] values,[31] various personality characteristics,[32] and anxiety,[33] but to date no study has been conducted of the relationship between free speech attitudes and rhetorical style.

In review, the three purposes of our study were (1) to discover if activation theory explains some of the restrictive attitudes toward free speech (2) to develop a reliable and valid free speech scale and (3) to ascertain if differences in free speech attitudes might be partially explained by differences in predispositions toward interpersonal rhetorical communication.

The benefits of this three pronged research would be to provide greater understanding of how the times impact upon attitude activation, to augment very sparce longitudinal data on free speech attitudes and to make a beginning of relating socio-political attitudes to communication predispositions.

METHOD

Subjects.

Subjects in the study were 232 students enrolled in introductory and upper level communication courses at Kent State University, during the fall semester of 1979, almost exactly ten years after the Osborne and Gorden survey.[34] The students participated in order to fulfill a course research requirement.

Procedures.

Most subjects completed the two scales described below during a regularly scheduled class session. Seventy of the 232 subjects were administered the scales individually. The subjects were told the study was investigating opinions about communication in our society and perception of individual communication behaviors. The Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale (Rhetsen)[35] contains 40 items and measures the individual's Noble Self, Rhetorical Sensitivity, and Rhetorical Reflector

tendencies in communication. The internal consistency and test-retest reliabilities reported by Hart, Carlson, and Eadie for the scale were generally high.[36] Hart, Carlson, and Eadie presented validity evidence for the scale and demonstrated that the scale differentiates between people on the basis of a wide variety of demographic and social variables.[37] The means and standard deviations in the present study were very similar to those reported by Hart, Carlson, and Eadie for their national sample of 3023 subjects. The cut-off points suggested by Hart, Carlson, and Eadie[38] for identifying pure Noble Selves, Rhetorical Sensitives, and Rhetorical Reflectors were followed in the present study.

The subjects also completed a 34-item instrument for measuring attitudes toward freedom of speech. Twenty-three of the items were taken from the 31-item instrument developed by Osborne and Gorden for their 1969 survey.[39] The eight items eliminated from the earlier instrument were either outdated or were items which did not discriminate between the top and bottom quartiles in the Osborne and Gorden study. The 11 items added for the present study were comprised of revisions of some of the items which did not discriminate in the Osborne and Gorden study, two global items about free speech, and items about current free speech issues. A Likert-type format was used for the instrument (a five-point scale which spanned from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree").

RESULTS

The first analysis considered the trend dimension of the study: Have attitudes toward free speech changed during the period from 1969 to 1979 ? For our 1979 survey, 23 of the 34 free speech items in our scale were identical to those from the 1969 Osborne and Gorden survey.[40] The 1969 sample (N = 741) was composed of students enrolled in introductory communication courses at the same university, the 1979 sample (N = 232) was taken. The two samples were compared on each of the 23 free speech items. Alpha was set at .05. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

The two samples differed significantly on 18 of the 23 items. The alpha percentage for these results was only 6%.[41] This is the proportion of results likely to be due to chance. Thus, 94% of the results observed in this analysis probably are due to nonchance effects. For 17 of those items, the 1979 sample had the more favorable attitudes toward free speech. The 1969 sample had more favorable attitudes toward free speech on only one item. Thus, for the case of this trend data, it seems apparent that attitudes toward freedom of speech became more favorable from 1969 to 1979. This supports the speculation that attitudes toward free speech become more restrictive in a stressful social climate.

The second phase of our analysis considered whether an instrument to measure attitudes toward freedom of speech could be derived from the 232 subjects' responses to the 34 free speech items. The correlation matrix was first factor analyzed using the principal factors method followed by a varimax rotation to simple factor structure. Eleven factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 were rotated. The solution revealed a very weak factor structure for the set of 34 items. Using the criterion that an item must load .50 or more on the primary factor and no more than .30 on secondary factors, it was determined that four items loaded on the first factor and two, one or none on the remaining factors. Cronbach's coeffiecient alpha [42] was then computed for the 34 items and yielded a value of .80, indicating a rather high level of internal consistency in subjects' responses to the items. This led us to conclude that although subjects responded to freedom of speech issues in a complex differentiated manner, revealing no small munber of constructs to summarize attitudes toward free speech, their responses to the 34 items in general were consistent enough to consider the set a global measure of attitudes toward free speech. In order to reduce the set of 34 items to a shorter version

which would represent economy in administration time and scoring, we selected 20 items with the highest item-total r's, with the restriction that the eight positively worded items would be retained to avoid a preponderance of negatively worded items. Cronbach's alpha for this 20-item set was .81. Factor analyses of the 20-item scale using varimax and then oblique rotations revealed very weak factor structures and we again concluded the set of items constituted a more global measure of attitudes toward free speech. The 20-item scale is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

In order to assess the criterion group validity of the scale subjects in the sample who completed the scale at the beginning of an elective course in freedom of speech (N = 22) were compared with the remainder of the sample (N = 210). We reasoned that students who elect a course in freedom of speech, presumably because of interest in the topic, as a group have more favorable initial attitudes toward free speech than other students. This assumption was supported. The mean on the 20-item scale for the free speech class was 74.18, whereas the mean for the rest of the sample was 66.05, $t = 3.29$, $p < .001$, $df = 230$. This evidence of criterion group validity together with apparent face validity of the items and acceptable internal consistency suggests the scale may be an adequate measure of attitudes toward free speech.

Construct validity evidence is especially important in establishing the validity of a scale. Construct validity involves placing the construct measured in an appropriate nomological network and deriving hypotheses, which, if supported, verify the scale used to measure the construct and also the nomological network.[43] Our third analysis may be considered relevant to the issue of construct validity. A hypothesis was derived by placing the attitudes toward free speech construct in

a nomological network pertaining to attitudes toward communication and rhetorical sensitivity.

For the third analysis "pure" Rhetorical Sensitives (N = 56), Noble Selves (N = 51), and Rhetorical Reflectors (N = 18) were identified according to the criteria set by Hart, Carlson, and Eadie.[44] The Hypothesis—that Noble Selves will have the most favorable attitudes, Rhetorical Reflectors the least favorable attitudes, with Rhetorical Sensitives intermediate—was tested by a one-way analysis of variance with scores on the 20-item free speech scale as the dependent variable. The respective means for Noble Selfs, Rhetorical Sensitives and Rhetorical Reflectors were 69.80, 67.23, and 61.61. The F-test was 4.50, $p < .02$, $df = 2/122$. Duncan's multiple range test revealed that Rhetorical Reflector's attitudes toward free speech were significantly less favorable than the attitudes of Noble Selves and Rhetorical Sensitives. Although the mean for Rhetorical Sensitives was, as predicted, less than that of the Noble Selves, the difference was not significant. Thus the hypothesis was partially supported.

DISCUSSION

The data reported in this article suggest attitudes toward free speech may fluctuate according to the degree of stress or anxiety in the social climate. When the level of stress is high, people may reject stimuli which would raise the level of stress even higher. The exercise of free speech may be viewed as inherently stressful. People are exposed to positions and ideas which are threatening to the status quo. Activation theory would predict such threat would be tolerated less when arousal is already high. If we assume a less stressful social climate on the Kent State University campus in 1979 than 1969, then the data fit rather well into an activation theory interpretation. For 17 or the 23 free speech issues surveyed by Osborne and Gorden in 1969, our 1979 sample had more favorable

attitudes.

Our data also fit with the complementary idea that in times of stress and turmoil people prefer a more authoritarian style of leadership. Free speech is more restricted with authoritarian leadership. A preference for less free speech may also be a vote for more of an autocracy. The 1969 results in the Osborne and Gorden study may reflect such a tendency.

If attitudes toward free speech do fluctuate according to good times and bad, it would seem necessary to have a valid and reliable instrument for monitoring attitudes toward free speech. Such measurement would represent an indirect index of the amount of stress in the social climate, and a direct index of the public's commitment to the First Amendment. The 20-item scale derived in this article would seem functional in this respect. The reliability was high. There was apparent face and content validity. Evidence was presented as to criterion group validity and also construct validity. With some very minor wording changes the instrument would be appropriate for non-college samples. A more standard scale for measuring attitudes toward free speech would be desirable, for as we observed earlier, public opinion research on free speech has not only been spotty, but has used a wide array of items which hampers trend analyses.

ENDNOTES

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26. Hart, Carlson, and Eadie, p. 3.

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29. Gallup Opinion Index, Vol. 43-35, p. 40. College students were polled (25) to their conservatism and liberalism:

	Extremely Conservative	Fairly Conservative	Middle	Fairly Liberal	Extremely Liberal
Demonstrators	2%	10%	12%	48%	3%
Non Demonstrators	2%	19%	29%	41%	2%

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TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF 1979 AND 1969 ATTITUDES TOWARD FREE SPEECH

Item[a]	1979 Sample[b]	1969 Sample[b]	t
1	3.25	3.04	2.10*
2	2.74	2.82	- .82
3	3.49	3.23	2.77*
5	3.89	3.98	-1.13
8	2.65	2.41	3.00*
9	3.11	3.04	.78
10	3.68	3.24	4.89*
11	3.28	2.39	9.89*
12	2.29	1.77	5.20*
14	2.86	2.16	7.00*
15	4.20	3.91	4.14*
18	3.38	3.58	-2.50*
19	3.65	2.51	12.67*
20	3.18	2.94	3.00*
21	3.19	3.06	1.44
22	3.41	3.27	1.56
23	2.57	2.41	2.00*
24	3.03	2.75	3.11*
25	3.00	2.40	6.00*
26	3.31	3.02	3.22*
28	3.66	3.02	7.11*
30	3.88	3.35	5.89*
31	3.32	2.55	8.56*

a = For the wording of each item see the Osborne and Gorden article

b = Five-point scale, the higer the mean, the more favorable the attitude

* $p < .05$

TABLE 2

ATTITUDES TOWARD FREE SPEECH QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey is designed to measure attitudes toward communication in our society. Indicate your degree of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements. There are no right or wrong answers, so please respond frankly. The scale is: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree, U = Undecided, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

1. Those who advocate violent overthrow of our government and its replacement with communism should not be allowed to speak on campus.

*2. Disrespectful behavior toward the flag should be an acceptable form of protest.

3. Police are justified in stopping a speaker who provokes a crowd with hostile remarks.

4. Controversial speakers, before they appear on campus, should be required to submit a copy of their speech to the administration.

*5. Instructors should not disclose anything a student said in class to prospective employers or government investigators unless the student requests him to do so.

6. The police have every right to use wiretaps to listen in on private conversations when they feel some crime is involved.

7. When a draft system is in effect, persons who burn their draft cards should be punished.

*8. Those who wish to distribute handbills from door to door in the residence halls should be allowed to do so.

9. Demonstrators who occupy campus buildings should be expelled.

*10. Teachers should express their personal opinions on controversial issues in the classroom.

11. The university has the right to search dorm rooms when they suspect students of being involved with drugs.

*12. No work, however pornographic or obscene, should be banned from the campus library.

13. Government loans should be unavailable to students who participate in antigovernment demonstrations.

14. The university should prevent the showing of obscene, revolutionary, or communist propaganda films on campus.

*15. Nudity should be acceptable in a university theatre.

Table 2
Continued

16. Articles in the campus newspaper likely to hurt the image of the university should be screened out by a faculty advisor.

*17. No law should abridge freedom of press, television, speech or any form of communication.

18. Persons who counsel draft resistance should be convicted of treason.

*19 Freedom of speech should be absolute.

20. Police should have greater power to search and seize suspected criminals.

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* Items worded pro free speech. Depending on the scoring system, the scores for either the pro or con items should be reversed.